

VZCZCXRO3126
RR RUEHPW
DE RUEHBUL #2631 2711223
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 271223Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5646
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS KABUL 002631

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/FO, SCA/A, EUR/RPM
STATE PASS TO AID FOR ASIA/SCAA
NSC FOR WOOD
OSD FOR WILKES
CENTCOM FOR CG CSTC-A, CG CJTF-101 POLAD

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Engagement on Afghan-Tajik Bridge Could Enhance Impact

REF: A) Kabul 1602 B) Kabul 757

11. (SBU) The Afghan-Tajik bridge continues to drive trade and improve relations between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The border crossing has the potential to become one of Afghanistan's most convenient, but dithering on both sides of the border about staffing the facility and on the Afghan side about development options have muted the bridge's impact. Coordinated efforts on both sides of the bridge could improve trade and economic development resulting from this multi-million dollar project.

New Bridge Could Become Pivotal

12. (U) Trade stimulated by the Afghan-Tajik bridge at Sher Khan Bandar is already driving economic activity in Northeast Afghanistan (Ref A). Cross border traffic has increased from 30 to 200 trucks per day; Afghan customs revenues have increased from zero to almost USD one million since its opening in August 2007. The world-class customs facilities for the USD 49 million bridge could accommodate even more traffic, and the road from the Sher Khan Bandar customs terminal to Kabul is entirely paved and traversable in seven hours.

Main Obstacles to Exploiting the Bridge . . .

13. (SBU) Neither the Afghans nor Tajiks have moved into their respective customs facilities. On the Afghan side, Afghan customs and border police are locked in an argument over use of the included dormitory and after-hours compound access. Unable to reach a solution in the province, the two sides have forwarded their dispute to Kabul for a decision. On the Tajik side, the government has only recently designated the customs service to run the facility. The Afghan and Tajik sides cannot agree whether or not to allow pedestrians on the bridge, and ferry traffic from the Tajik side continues to siphon off revenue. The Tajiks are preparing to occupy the facilities provided once three items are completed: a parking area for waiting trucks, electrical power and the delivery of the furniture for the facilities.

14. (SBU) BMTF and ECON section staff from Kabul visited the bridge with PRTOFF and noted not only trash, but also cracks in the surface of the bridge. According to the Afghan officials accompanying the group, there was no coordination with the Tajik side on bridge maintenance. The group did not see the bridge surface on the Tajik side, but the fear is that without adequate maintenance, the bridge's ability to handle traffic could be greatly reduced.

. . . And What to Do About It

15. (SBU) Embassies Kabul and Dushanbe agree we need a coordinated effort with players on both sides of the border. First steps should be getting Afghans and Tajiks into the facilities, followed by a bridge maintenance agreement. The Ministry of Transportation on the Tajik side is responsible for the maintenance of the bridge and has been given the task of working with the Afghan government to coordinate maintenance. We can then begin addressing the thornier issues of pedestrian traffic and closing the ferry. From a pedestrian traffic position on the Tajik side, the pedestrian facilities are not yet ready; they should be ready shortly after the Customs Service begins full occupation and use. Kunduz shows signs of thriving economically. Our concerted efforts on both sides of the border can reward the private sector initiatives that are evident in Kunduz.

16. (U) This cable has been cleared with Embassy Dushanbe.

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